

Good morning. I welcome you all to this hearing to review the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Response Plan to detect and control the potential spread of avian influenza into the United States. We are fortunate to have the Administrator of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) of USDA here with us today to provide our Committee with valuable information on this topic of concern to all Americans. I thank you Dr. DeHaven for your participation in this hearing and welcome those who are listening via our website.

In November of last year, this Committee [held a hearing](#) on the role of U.S. agriculture - including Federal, State and local governments and private industry - in the fight against avian influenza. Today's hearing will focus solely on the role of the USDA in this coordinated effort.

In April of this year, USDA's APHIS released its Draft National Avian Influenza Response Plan. The draft plan details how our government will rapidly detect and quickly respond to highly pathogenic avian influenza if and when it reaches American shores. The plan, according to USDA, is intended to complement regional, State, and industry plans. I look forward to hearing how this plan will be utilized in conjunction with the President's National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza and regional and State plans to control and eradicate avian influenza.

Many experts agree that the form of avian influenza that has rapidly spread across Southeast Asia, Africa and parts of Europe and the Middle East is likely to reach the United States either through migratory birds or through birds smuggled illegally into our country from affected regions. While the arrival of the H5N1 virus in America is not a certainty, it is in the best interest of all Americans that we operate under the assumption that it will arrive. This will ensure that through advanced planning we will be prepared. I hope to hear more details today on how USDA is preparing to address avian influenza should it be found in the United States.

Avian influenza has caused a great deal of concern among American families, but let us be clear to all of those listening. If the H5N1 form of avian influenza should appear in America tomorrow, it would NOT signal the onset of a human pandemic.

This disease is first and foremost an animal disease. The current outbreak we see on news broadcasts and in dramatic made-for-television movies is almost exclusively a disease of birds. A limited number of human beings who have been in direct contact with sick birds have become infected and some unfortunately have died. But to date, the virus has NOT shown the ability to efficiently pass directly from human to human. And it is not clear if it will EVER do so. However, the threat does exist that the virus might mutate to allow for a human pandemic, and thus we must be ever vigilant and take appropriate precautions. The key to limiting the potential for a human pandemic is to focus our efforts on the current virus in birds. On the frontlines of those efforts is the United States Department of Agriculture.

The USDA has a long history of addressing avian influenza in our domestic and wild bird populations. While we have not experienced an outbreak of the H5N1 strain of the virus that has captured the fascination of the media, the USDA has long been charged with protecting our U.S. poultry industry from avian influenza. And to date, they have done a commendable job, however we cannot become complacent. The USDA National Response Plan is based on the

invaluable experience of government officials who have addressed avian influenza and other foreign animal disease threats in the past. Even so, I am encouraged that USDA considers this a living document and has sought the input from other stakeholders. I hope that USDA will strongly consider and evaluate the input provided and continue an open dialogue with State and local governments, as well as industry. A transparent and communicative approach will be a key asset in our fight to control this disease.

Many of you listening here today likely watched a fictional, made-for-television movie on ABC Tuesday night that dramatized a theoretical outbreak of the H5N1 bird flu virus. In the movie, the virus quickly mutated into a form easily spread between humans, resulting in a worldwide pandemic. This work of fiction has undoubtedly alerted the American public to the potential threat of an influenza pandemic, and perhaps that is a good thing. However, I am concerned that sensationalist movies and inaccurate media portrayals may do more to alarm Americans than to increase their awareness. I am particularly concerned with how Americans might view the U.S. poultry industry with all of this increased attention. With all we know at this moment, even if H5N1 were present in the United States, properly cooked poultry would remain completely safe for American consumers. I look forward to further clarifying that point and some of the movie's other misleading assertions with Dr. DeHaven today.

We must all be mindful that viruses and pandemics do not operate on the timetable of man. Though our interest in the H5N1 strain of avian influenza may be heightened at this time; our interest alone does not make the next pandemic any more certain or likely. In our world, we are constantly bombarded by naturally occurring biological threats. Pandemics have occurred throughout the course of human history and we undoubtedly will be faced with this and other threats in the future. But, it is only arrogance that will lead us to state with certainty that the H5N1 strain will cause the next pandemic. Rather than act in a reactionary and irresponsible fashion, the U.S. must make broad preparations for the next pandemic, in whatever form it might take, with purpose, guile and compassion. Our preparations in the fight against avian influenza, if done correctly, will serve the American people well in this and other challenges to come.